

Remarks
Ambassador D. Brent Hardt
On the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day Reception
May 2nd, 2012
Chief of Mission Residence

Your Excellency President Ramotar, Honorable Prime Minister Samuel Hinds, Speaker of the National Assembly Trotman, Honorable Ministers, other Members of the National Assembly, members of the diplomatic corps, and our special guests this evening: members of the Guyana media corps. Writing in 1787, Thomas Jefferson stated: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Tomorrow is World Press Freedom Day, which will be officially celebrated by UNESCO in Tunisia, but which is also rightly celebrated in countries throughout the world. It was the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which affirmed that: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart

information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

The people of the United States, like the people of Guyana, recognize the inestimable value of a free press, especially in our modern world where information is power. In fact, few people can make a living, hold governments accountable, or educate their children without a healthy supply of free-flowing information. Citizens, businesses, and governments need accurate, timely, and independent news they can trust.

Media freedom keeps societies and economies vibrant, energetic, and healthy. And the advent of social media -- blogs, Twitter, and Facebook -- give everyday citizens the power to share their voices and opinions with the world. Indeed, we all saw how freelance journalists in the Middle East using social media helped build the groundswell that led to the Arab Spring.

When the free flow of news and information is cut off, people, economies, and societies suffer. In fact, the countries with the highest degree of press freedom – Finland, Norway and Sweden -- are among the world’s most prosperous countries, while those with the most

restricted freedom -- Iran, Equatorial Guinea, Cuba, and Syria – face serious economic and political challenges. It is clear: governments that restrict media also restrict other freedoms necessary for economies and societies to prosper, and the media has a legitimate role in holding governments accountable. As another American Founding Father, James Madison, observed: “To the press alone, chequered as it is with abuses, the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression.”

Unfortunately, too many governments attempt to censor the media, directly or indirectly. Too many investigative journalists are being silenced, many for exposing corruption – at local, state, or national government levels. And too many attacks and murders of journalists go unpunished. I invite you to read about the lives and trials of some of your fellow journalists and how their bravery is preserving and promoting democracy around the world at www.humanrights.gov.

On the Occasion of World Press Freedom Day, the United States calls on all governments around the world to take the steps necessary to create space for independent journalists to do their work without fear of violence or persecution. We must continue to stand up for those who speak out in perilous circumstances as they pursue, record, and report the truth.

That is why we remember on May 3rd each year that journalism is a calling of everyday heroes like you. We salute you for your hard work, day in and day out, to bring the news to the people of Guyana, to call attention to social problems and progress, take note of economic developments and challenges, expose corruption, and investigate the facts. We also salute courageous journalists, bloggers, and citizens worldwide who have sacrificed their lives, health, or freedom so that others could know the truth. And we honor the role of free and independent media in creating sustainable democracies and open, healthy societies. As U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton observed on last year's World Press Freedom Day, "by exposing abuses of

power, challenging assumptions, and providing constructive outlets for new ideas and for dissent, journalists safeguard our freedoms.”

Press freedoms are an indispensable right in the Western Hemisphere. The fourth article of the Inter-American Democratic Charter adopted by the members of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 2001 clearly defines the freedom of expression and of the press as essential components for the exercise of democracy. Yet these freedoms are at risk today in the Americas. The Inter-American Press Association, the IAPA, said on April 23rd: “The main problems facing the press in the Americas are crimes against journalists for the sole fact that they are performing their work under governments of democratic origin, but which are authoritarian and use state-controlled media to persecute and defame the independent press.” Ricardo Trotti of the IAPA, observed that, if countries leave the definition of fundamental freedoms up to each president's interpretation, "we run the risk of legalizing the violations of the most fundamental human rights."

Today, a number of governments in the Americas, most notably Venezuela and Ecuador, are oppressing private media, expropriating media companies, and revoking licenses for sharing opposing views to entrenched regimes.

In its 2011-12 Press Freedom Index, *Reporters without Borders* ranks Guyana 58th worldwide and reports that Guyana has a satisfactory record in fundamental freedoms, with journalists experiencing very few threats or assaults. It notes that media concerns are chiefly focused on relations with the government and cites the state monopoly of radio as a major deficiency. In the just released Freedom House rankings covering 2011, Guyana was one of two countries in the Hemisphere that slipped from a “Free” rating to a “Partly Free” ranking, emerging 70th overall. The report cited heightened political polarization of the media, verbal intimidation of the media, and politically influenced distribution of licenses as core concerns. I should note by way of comparison that the U.S. was ranked 47th by Reporters without Borders and 22nd by Freedom House, with issues noted in threats to media diversity, lack of federal

source protection legislation, and detentions of journalists covering the occupy protests. So all countries face challenges and must be vigilant in addressing these issues.

It is encouraging that the Government took steps towards freeing the airwaves of Guyana and ending the model of limited, state-influenced radio that has restricted the public's access to the airwaves. As someone who has seen how vital the radio is to the public square throughout the Caribbean, I must admit that I was genuinely surprised to learn that Guyana had only one radio station. Elsewhere in the region, radio news and talk shows are the lifeblood of political and social discourse. I applaud the initial approval last year of 11 new radio broadcasting licenses, and look forward to seeing the approval processes for these and other potential stations finalized in the near future. Going forward, it is vital that this process comes under the purview of an impartial and transparent National Broadcast Authority.

In recent weeks, I have seen some discussion within the media centered on issues of responsibilities of media in the context of a

developing country, suggesting that the media censor itself, minimizing reporting on crime and corruption, and instead provide “news that would promote development.” I find such suggestions troubling. While it is vital for the media to do its job well, report accurately, and seek to convey varying perspectives, journalists should not be asking themselves if and how information they report will affect national development. Advancing national development is a job for elected representatives, working with the private sector and civil society. The role of the media to bring to the public debate the issues that affect people directly, such as citizen security, corruption, poverty, and violence, so that they can be understood and addressed effectively by governments and legislatures.

It is not a new phenomenon that the relationship between governments and the media is fraught with tension. In our own U.S. history, we had, from our earliest days as a poor developing country, a vigorous press that was often sharply critical of our government. President John Adams became so infuriated with the media that he passed the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 that made it a crime to

publish "false, scandalous, and malicious writing" against the government or certain officials. This proved to be Adam's biggest mistake and lost him the 1800 elections to Thomas Jefferson. Many presidents after Adams may have cursed the press, but there is no doubt that the vitality and freedom of our press and the lack of restraints on it, have been at the very heart of our growth and prosperity as a nation. It exposed our corruption and excesses of power such as Watergate. It highlighted our shortcomings in working conditions and civil rights and awakened our national environmental consciousness. Here again, Jefferson offers timeless wisdom: "Our liberty depends on freedom of the press, and that *cannot be limited without being lost.*"

All this to say that, within Guyana's current media framework, I have been greatly impressed by the variety and scope of media outlets, the vitality of the press in Guyana, and your willingness to take on tough issues. For a country of 800,000 people to produce four quality daily newspapers and a range of television news programs is truly impressive. I have learned much from my daily read of the papers and scan of

television news. All of you -- journalists, editors, producers, photographers, bloggers, columnists, Facebook friends, and Tweeters -- play a vital role in shaping the national conversation. I should also note that online media and other new forms of communication are reshaping the way people receive, share, and discuss information. I think many were struck by the role that social media played in last year's elections – an issue that has been assessed in a groundbreaking book published by the University of Guyana with the support of USAID entitled: “*Virtual Politics - The Internet and Guyana's 2011 election.*”

Of course, the traditional media also played an essential role in the elections. It was encouraging to see a record number of media practitioners sign the media code of conduct prior to the elections that established a framework and set the tone for generally fair and balanced election reporting. Many of you may recall that I had promised at that signing ceremony that, if the code was adhered to, I would throw a party to celebrate. Well, here we are at last!

Mr. President, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen; fundamental freedoms such as those enshrined in the UN Declaration of 1948 are universal. They are not defined by an individual, a government, a country, culture, race, creed, or religion. Fundamental freedoms, and the rights they uphold, should be unwavering. We all need to defend these freedoms, and you, the members of the media in Guyana, are on the front lines of this battle. My wife, Sasha, and I and all of our Embassy team are honored to be able to host you and welcome you this evening to celebrate World Press Freedom Day.

Thank you.